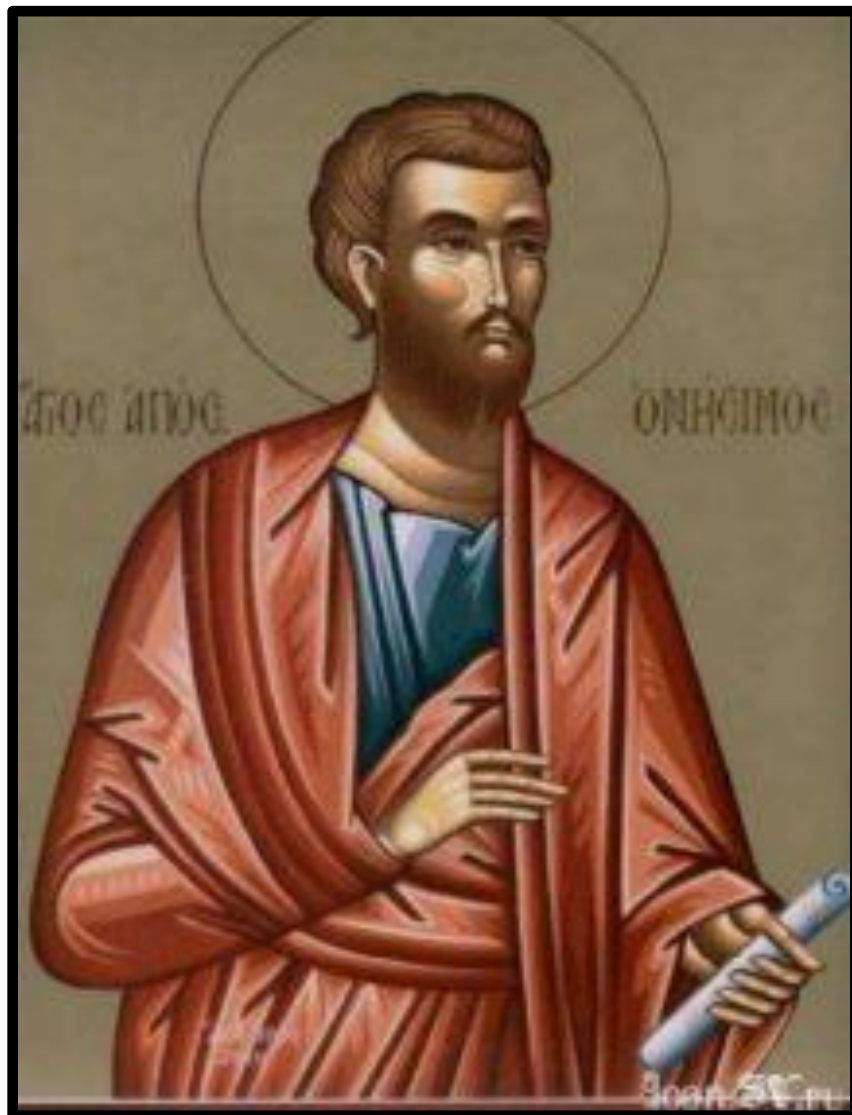


LIVING GODS WILL

The Disciple

ONESIMUS



Saint Onesimus

The Disciple **ONESIMUS**

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Born: Phrygia, Greece
Died: 109 AD, Puteoli, Italy
Death: Stoned to death and beheaded

He was a slave of **Philemon**

He was a friend to **Apostle Paul**

He was **Bishop of Ephesus**

He was converted to Christianity by **Apostle Paul**

Onesimus was the fugitive slave of **Philemon**, the **apostle Paul's** friend.

Onesimus had robbed his master **Philemon** and fled to Rome, a large city where he could easily hide.

Provisionally, **Onesimus** encountered **Paul** in Rome where the apostle was serving time in prison.

Some scholars suggest that **Paul** had led **Onesimus** to Christ previously in Colossae and that, when **Onesimus** ran away, he sought out **Paul** on purpose.

However, it is more likely that **Onesimus** became a Christian after running away from **Philemon** and running into **Paul** in Rome:

"I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains" (Philemon 1:10).

Paul uses a play on words when he refers to **Onesimus** in verse 11: **"Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me."**

The name **Onesimus** means **"helpful," "useful,"** or **"profitable."** It was a common name for slaves in that day.

Before salvation, **Onesimus** had been useless or unprofitable to **Philemon**, but now he had become immensely beneficial to both his master and to **Paul**. As a believer in **Jesus Christ**, **Onesimus** lived up to his name.

On behalf of **Onesimus**, **Paul**, still imprisoned in Rome, wrote his letter to **Onesimus's** master, **Philemon**. The apostle pleaded with **Philemon** to accept **Onesimus** back, not as a slave but as a believer and a brother in **Christ**.

Paul cared deeply for **Onesimus** because the young man had been a great blessing to him.

In fact, **Onesimus** had been so helpful that **Paul** longed for him to stay at his side:

“I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary” (Philemon 1:12–14).

Philemon and his family lived in Colossae, and the Colossian church met at his house. **Paul** wrote his letter to the Colossians at the same time he wrote to **Philemon**.

In that letter, **Paul** mentioned that **Onesimus** would be coming home. **Paul** gave both letters to **Tychicus** and **Onesimus** to carry back to **Philemon** (**Colossians 4:9**).

The heart of **Paul’s** plea to **Philemon** is summed up in **verses 15–19**:

“Perhaps the reason [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self” (Philemon 1:15–19).

Forgiveness and reconciliation are spotlighted in the life of **Onesimus** and the book of **Philemon**.

Paul challenges **Philemon** to receive **Onesimus** back in the same way he would welcome **Paul**, as a brother and a partner in the gospel. And **Paul** promises to pay back anything **Onesimus** owed.

The apostle authenticates his promise by writing in his own hand, essentially demonstrating his commitment to see the relationship between these two brothers fully restored.

Then **Paul** applies some gentle pressure by reminding **Philemon** that he owes his life to **Paul**, confirming that the apostle was the person who had led **Philemon** to **Christ**.

By reminding **Philemon** of his own salvation, **Paul** hopes he will look beyond **Onesimus’s** transgressions and reflect on the broader reality of forgiveness in **Jesus Christ**, the One who pardons our every wrong.

Philemon was a committed Christian who had opened his home to the whole community of believers.

In **verses 4–7**, **Paul** talks about his strong faith and love for God’s people. In **verse 21**, the apostle expresses his confidence that **Philemon** will indeed follow through with his appeal to forgive and restore **Onesimus**.

Philemon may have been a kind and gracious master, but for whatever reason, **Onesimus** wanted to be free. As a slave, he ran from his master but came face to face with the living **God** through His servant **Paul**.

Onesimus’s story is the classic picture of one who tries to run from **God**, a good and gracious Master, but instead runs right into His arms. Through salvation, the fugitive sinner finds grace, forgiveness, and the freedom that is found only in **Jesus Christ**.

The story of **Onesimus** and **Philemon** is a beautiful picture of the distinction between law and grace. Both Roman law and the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament gave **Philemon** the right to punish a runaway slave.

But the covenant of grace through the Lord **Jesus** allowed both master and slave to fellowship in love on an equal basis in the body of **Christ**.

Paul’s payment of all of **Onesimus’s** debts parallels **Christ’s** payment for our sins. **Philemon’s** acceptance of **Onesimus** as a brother in **Christ** helped lay the foundation for the abolitionist movement centuries later—master and slave are equals in **Christ**.

During the reign of the **emperor Trajan (89-117 AD)**, Saint **Onesimus** was arrested and brought to trial before the **eparch Tertillus**. He held the saint in prison for eighteen days, and then sent him to prison in the city of **Puteoli**.

In the year 109 AD, the eparch sent for the prisoner and, convincing himself that Saint Onesimus maintained his faith in Christ, had him stoned, after which they beheaded the saint with a sword.

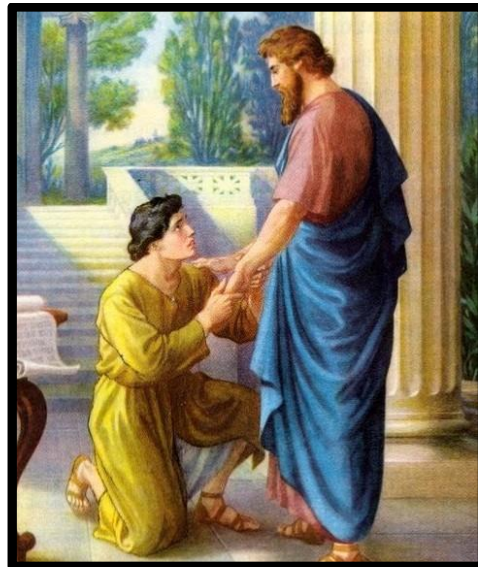
SUPPORTING SCRIPTURE

Colossians 4:9 with **Onesimus**, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will make known to you all things which are happening here.

Philemon 1:10 I appeal to you for my son **Onesimus**, whom I have begotten while in my chains.



Painting depicting death of Onesimus, from the Menologion of Basil II



PHILEMON AND ONESIMUS